



**PLAYFULNESS-** Bruce Springsteen drops to floor during nearly 3-hour Inglewood Forum

concert Wednesday night. The concert confirmed his status as rock's premier performer.  
Times photos by George Rose

## POP MUSIC REVIEW

# Springsteen, the Class of the Field

**BY ROBERT HILBURN**

*Times Pop Music Critic*

When Bruce Springsteen called his band to the front of the stage Wednesday night after a dazzling, emotionally draining hour-and-10-minute performance, the guy across the aisle from me at the Inglewood Forum figured the concert was over.

Having never seen Springsteen before, Richard Palmer, 27, didn't know about the rock singer's tendency toward two- and three-hour shows. Palmer, visiting here from Indiana, was drawn to the concert out of curiosity. He had enjoyed one of Springsteen's records, but was mainly intrigued by all the media attention. He seemed elated at the end.

"That's one of the best shows I've ever seen," he said, slipping a blue windbreaker on. "I've never seen anyone work as hard as that. What a show!"

Then, the surprise.

### 'What More Could He Do?'

As Springsteen finished introducing the band, he waved to the audience and said, "We'll be back . . . after a 15-minute break."

"BACK?" Palmer repeated incredulously. "What more could he do?"

There was plenty left.

Springsteen and the often blistering E Street Band returned for 13 more numbers in an astounding hour-and-35-minute stint that left little doubt that he is the pre-eminent performer in rock music.

The line in rock in 1978 begins with 28-year-old Springsteen. More precisely, it begins right behind him. Without question, he's now No. 1.

Because he has yet to achieve massive AM radio exposure, Springsteen isn't the biggest-seller in rock or the biggest concert draw. His inability to do more than one show at the scaled-down, 14,000-seat Forum was a reminder that he is not yet a full-fledged commercial superstar.

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**BLISTERING-** Springsteen is joined by saxophonist Clarence Clemons on Forum stage.

# Springsteen, the Class of the Field

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By any other measure, however, he is the class of the field.

When he appeared at Santa Monica Civic in 1976, Springsteen was already closing in rapidly on the title of rock's top attraction, but the competition wasn't all that intense in those days.

Despite noteworthy pop-rock acts like Elton John, David Bowie and the Eagles, no pure rock outfit had risen in the '70s to challenge seriously such '60s holdovers as the Rolling Stones, the Who or Led Zeppelin.

This time, however, Springsteen arrived here during a period blessed with more invigorating rock shows quite possibly than any six-month period in the '70s. Among them: Tom Petty, Elvis Costello, Lou Reed, Bob Seger.

None matched the power and ambition of Springsteen's Forum performance.

To find a challenger, one has to go back much further than January. Narrowing consideration to Forum concerts, the most memorable rock shows include the Rolling Stones' rowdy, all-night affair in 1969, Elvis Presley's triumphant appearance in 1971, Elton John's celebratory 1972 extravaganza and Bob Dylan's dramatic return in 1974 with the Band.

Springsteen's concert not only ranks with those, but also arguably rates ahead of some. In his nearly three-hour performance, Springsteen touched on virtually every element that has ever been important in rock.

There were moments of the rebellion, sexual bravado and primal urgency associated with the music's starkness, but also an inviting accessibility and good nature that underscores rock's lighter side.

### Loyal Following

In his broadest moments, Springsteen mixes the performance emphasis and immediacy of the Presley school of rock with the content and lyric bite of the Dylan tradition. Given that blend, it's no wonder Springsteen has attracted a fiercely loyal following.

Tommy Rafferty, an 18-year-old fan from San Francisco, was seeing his third Springsteen show on the California swing. He and two buddies also had tickets for Springsteen's Sunday night date at the San Diego Sports Arena.

But the news that began circulating around the Forum Wednesday of a special Springsteen show Friday night at the 500-seat Roxy left Rafferty and his friends perplexed. Tickets wouldn't go on sale at the Roxy until noon Thursday, but there were only about 250 seats were available to the public.

Not wanting to miss Springsteen in such an intimate setting, they decided one of the three should leave the Forum at intermission and head to the Roxy. After a couple of losing coin flips, Rafferty headed to the parking lot. The others would try to hitch a ride.

As he left, he offered this parting shot: "Come over there as soon as the show is over . . . and bring me something to eat. It's going to be a long night . . ."

### Constant Intensity

Springsteen doesn't waste any time on stage. He turns on the intensity faster than anyone I've seen, other than soul singer Al Green. The remarkable thing is he can keep the intensity going. Where Green and his audience seem emotionally exhausted by the end of Green's 40- to 60-minute shows, Springsteen is able to revive the emotions time after time.

A better writer and guitarist than singer, Springsteen makes up in character and intensity what he lacks in vocal purity. He surrounds the songs with dynamic movements that frame the music without the annoying calculation of so many these days.

On the celebratory tunes, he exhibits an enthusiasm that comes across as genuine and refreshingly accessible. When he jumps from the stage into the audience, it's not just a token gesture. He sometimes races up and down the various aisles and even up 10 to 12 steps of the side logs.

When Forum security guards got between him and the audience, he challenged them. "Hey, you two guys work here or something?" he asked when guards pushed fans back during one of his ventures into the audience. "These

people are just my friends." At another point, Springsteen leaped from the stage to lead an aisle full of fans past a guard blockade to the edge of the stage.

But physical participation isn't the only goal. As much as anyone in rock since Dylan, Springsteen aims for emotional involvement. Just as he pushes himself and his band to exhausting limits, he seems to challenge his audience to utilize its own potential.

### Striking Out at Targets

He made that message clear Wednesday by opening with "Badlands," the marvelously designed first track from the new "Darkness on the Edge of Town" L.P. Backed by a sizzling arrangement punctuated by Clarence Clemons' spicy saxophone work and Max Weinberg's potent drumming, he strikes out at the targets—psychological or externally imposed—that often undercut one's ambitions.

*Talk about a dream  
Try to make it real  
You wake up in the night  
With a fear so real . . .*

Variations on the theme are found in several tunes, but they are placed in such a riveting rock context that they never become sermons. To make doubly sure, Springsteen adds all sorts of light touches, from antics with saxophonist Clemons to collapsing from mock exhaustion at the end of the show and being carried off in a stretcher. He also precedes some of the songs with exaggerated tales from his own New Jersey youth.

Beyond a generous supply of tunes from the "Born to Run" and "Darkness on the Edge of Town" albums, he offered his own powerful version of "Because the Night," the song he co-wrote with Patti Smith. Though her record is in the Top 20, Springsteen's own rendition has an even greater sense of drama. The finale was an extended version of Gary (U.S.) Bond's old party-time "Quarter to Three."

### Best Show Ever

Even after the end of the show, hundreds near the edge of the stage remained after the lights went on. But there was really no more Springsteen could do at that point. Backstage, the group was thrilled at the show and the audience's response. Jon Landau, the former Rolling Stone critic who co-produced Springsteen's last two albums, thought it might have been the singer-guitarist's best show ever. Jackson Browne and Gary Busey, who plays the title role in "The Buddy Holly Show," were among the well-wishers.

Over at the Roxy, meanwhile, more than 100 people were already in line. By noon Thursday, several hundred more had joined them. In a few hours, it would all start again. Because he had left the concert early, Tommy Rafferty was close enough to the front to be guaranteed tickets. For those who didn't make it in time, they'll be able to at least listen. The whole Roxy show will be broadcast, starting at approximately 9 p.m., on KMET-FM (94.7).